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SUBJECT: MEPI-FUNDED NDI PROJECT COMES UNDER FIRE

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) The MEPI-funded National Democratic Institute (NDI) project in Bahrain has attracted criticism from many directions recently. Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Abdul Ghaffar has privately expressed his concerns to the Ambassador several times that NDI gives too much emphasis to opposition views at the expense of government supporters. MP Mohammed Khalid, an outspoken opponent of the United States, complained that NDI should not be "the custodian of the democratic process in Bahrain." Shia cleric Shaikh Issa Qassem attacked NDI in his June 17 sermon, saying that NDI is a "modern cultural invader" and enemy of religion and Islam. Following NDI's demand for a retraction, Al Wifaq President Shaikh Ali Salman said publicly that Qassem was not referring to NDI in his comments. Despite the overheated rhetoric, we have detected no change in the GOB's full support for NDI, and we consider the project to be essential to achieving our democratization policy goals. End Summary.

Abdul Ghaffar Complains of NDI Slant

2. (C) NDI's Bahrain project has come under fire from government officials, parliamentarians, columnists, and, most recently, the Kingdom's most prominent Shia cleric. Minister of State for Foreign Affairs/Information Minister Mohammed Abdul Ghaffar has expressed concern to the Ambassador on several occasions in the past few months about NDI's activities. Abdul Ghaffar, who was likely under instructions from the Cabinet, complained that NDI was too sympathetic to the (Shia) opposition's perspective and provided a platform for their views at seminars and workshops without allowing other (pro-government) points of view. Abdul Ghaffar also claimed that NDI Director Fawzi Guleid was not keeping the GOB informed about his activities. The Ambassador told Abdul Ghaffar that the USG strongly backed NDI's activities in Bahrain. He emphasized that NDI always partnered with a local organization and ensured a wide range of views in its seminars. He also gave Abdul Ghaffar a copy of NDI's program of activities, which Guleid had passed to the Minister a few months earlier.

3. (U) In an ironic turn, Abdul Ghaffar appeared before the Council of Representatives (COR - elected lower house of parliament) June 14 to defend NDI. MP Shaikh Mohammed Khalid, a member of Al Minbar (Muslim Brotherhood) bloc in the COR and a vociferous opponent of the United States, told Abdul Ghaffar that a foreign establishment (NDI) should not "come here and become the custodian of the democratic process in Bahrain." Abdul Ghaffar responded that NDI is not crossing any red lines and is helping promote democracy. He pointed out (accurately) that Al Minbar is an avid participant in NDI activities. Khalid said he was proud to be a member of Al Minbar but that he does not share its views about "this suspicious institute."

Cleric Brands NDI "Enemy of Religion"

4. (SBU) Bahrain's senior-most Shia cleric Shaikh Issa Qassem attacked NDI in his June 17 sermon. (Note: Qassem has publicly criticized NDI in the past; in June 2004, he complained that NDI had not officially registered with the GOB like other organizations. This is still the case, but NDI is in the process of negotiating an MOU with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.) Qassem said, "This government, like all other governments, is very sensitive to any local political role played by a foreign country or organization... We ask, why the exception for NDI? What are the justifications?... Their intervention is not only harmful to the government but to the people as well. To a great extent, it is a modern cultural invader, an enemy of religion, an enemy of earthly interests, and an enemy of the peoples of this faith (Islam)."

15. (C) Guleid called on the Ambassador June 21 and said that he had just departed a meeting with leading Shia opposition society Al Wifaq President Shaikh Ali Salman. Guleid had passed Salman a letter from NDI/Washington Middle East Senior Director Les Campbell to Qassem demanding an explanation and retraction of his comments. Guleid reported that Salman had promised to take up the matter with Qassem and stressed that he (Salman) did not share Qassem's opinion about NDI. Guleid told the Ambassador that Qassem had no right to make the types of statements he did. It was legitimate to oppose NDI's programming, but Qassem's comments about NDI being an enemy of Islam were "beyond the pale." Guleid was worried that radicals in other countries where NDI operates with large Shia populations, including Iraq and Lebanon, could pick up Qassem's statements and possibly consider attacking NDI personnel in the name of Islam.

A Retraction, Of Sorts

16. (C) Perhaps in response to NDI's demand, Qassem said in his June 24 sermon, "We must be wise and reasonable even with foreign antagonistic rhetoric against Islam. We must be vigilant and alert but we must be as far as possible from fatwas of terrorism and incitement. We must not spread the language of violence in the local and international community. Our school is a school of peace, security, stability and dialogue. Our slogan remains 'the dialogue of civilizations' instead of 'the clash of civilizations.'" In an article in the June 27 edition of the independent Al Wasat newspaper, Salman told a reporter that Qassem did not mean NDI when he described foreign intervention as the enemy of religion. Guleid told us he had requested that the offending portions of Qassem's June 17 sermon be removed from the cleric's website. He was, however, satisfied with the statements of Qassem and Salman and would now drop the matter.

17. (U) The usual bunch of anti-American columnists have jumped on the bandwagon to criticize NDI. Mahmeed Al Mahmeed of Akhbar Al Khaleej newspaper suggested in his June 17 column that if NDI had been Saudi or Iranian, suspicions would have been raised much sooner. Adel Al Marzook, also from Akhbar Al Khaleej, wrote on June 18, "The current agenda of NDI is the agenda of the American political rhetoric. When the priorities of U.S. policy change, NDI's role will also change." In contrast, Sawsan Al Shaer of Al Ayam newspaper June 20 questioned the validity of the critiques of NDI. She wrote that the motivation behind the criticism is political and that those coming down hard on NDI have yet to prove that the organization's activities are harmful to Bahrain's national interest.

Comment

18. (C) Despite recent criticism in Bahrain, we have detected no change in the GOB's full commitment to NDI. The Royal Court, in particular, is a strong supporter. This incident, however, demonstrates the sensitive nature of the political issues NDI works on, and highlights Bahrainis' distress about perceived outside influence in their fledgling democracy. We consider NDI programming to be an essential tool in achieving our democratization policy objectives.

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